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ABSTRACT

The problems encountered in implementing an intensive summer course in English for specific purposes, designed to prepare students for graduate study in urban planning, urban design, and architecture, are discussed by the course's language and content specialists. Positive course results included development of useful classroom communication skills, practice in content listening, and development of reading and writing skills. However, tensions occurred as a result of differing expectations on the parts of the language specialist, content specialist, content area faculty, and students despite strong commitment to collaboration. Four salient issues are addressed, based on observations, formal evaluations, and followup interviews: (1) while no admissions requirements were specified, staff expected the program to be taken seriously and to see significant gains; students saw the course as an added opportunity; (2) lines of responsibility were not clearly defined; (3) there were serious discrepancies in the instructional objectives of the language and content specialists; and (4) course developers expected students to perceive course activities, especially field trips, more positively and with more interest. Lessons learned for future curriculum projects are summarized. (MSE)

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What Went Wrong: A Case of Differences in Expectations

A 7-week intensive summer program for graduates entering M. A. programs in City Planning, Regional Development, Urban Design, and Architecture.

Areas of Need:

1. the academic communication skills most needed in the required first-year courses (and what the faculty reported that student have had the most difficulty with in the first year)
2. the communication skills needed to cope with the administration in a large and complex institution such as Penn
3. the communication skills needed to understand program requirements at an American university
4. cultural knowledge about the U.S. and the university that would be relevant to their studies...the information that professors assume their students already know if they are Americans

Courses Offered:

1. American Culture: Issues Related to Planning and Design
2. Listening for Planning and Design
3. Reading for Academic Orientation
4. Introduction to Academic Writing
5. Oral Academic Communication Skills
(with a planning, development and design content focus, supported by assistance with necessary oral communication skills)

Some examples of areas in which there were mixed expectations on the parts of the content faculty and specialist, English language specialist, and students.

1. A key admissions policy
2. Lines of responsibility
3. Views of teaching objectives
4. Expecting students to see through my eyes

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Paper presented at:
10th Annual Conference on
Languages and Communication for World
Business and the Professions, 1990

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What Went Wrong: A Case of Differences in Expectations

This is a report on an intensive summer English for Specific Purposes program conducted in cooperation with the the Department of City and Regional Planning to prepare graduate students to begin coursework in the Fall. After some brief backgrounding, the rest of the presentation was presented in a dialogue format.

While the focus of this paper is on what went wrong, we don't want you to get the idea that nothing went right. Some positive results were that:

- Students found the oral classroom communication skills useful.

- They became used to listening to content in their fields - they had gotten over the initial shock, they'd usually encounter in the first month of lectures.

- They appreciated the reading and writing skills they developed--wished they had had more.

-Professors wished several other students had also taken the program.

But as an experimental summer program to prepare international students to enter graduate programs in city planning, urban design, and architecture, there were some rough edges, tensions, as a result of differences in expectations on the part of the language specialist (myself), the content specialist (Joyce), faculty members of the content area departments, and the students. This was in spite of a very strong commitment between the English Language Programs and the Department of City Planning and Regional Development to work together.

There are a number of problem areas that could be covered, but given the limited time we have, we've chosen a few that might also be relevant to other programs run jointly with other content departments. We hope you'll find them useful. They relate to the following areas:

1. A key admissions policy
2. Lines of responsibility
3. Views of teaching objectives
4. Expecting students to see through my eyes

We base our observations on staff and content department feedback during and at the end of the program, formal student evaluations, and follow-up interviews three months later with students and

selected faculty members. Joyce has also been in touch with them informally through the department since then. Also each time Joyce and I have talked about the program, we keep coming up with more insights about the program, the students, and ourselves. Or, at least, we think they are insights.

JP: The Chair of the Department of City Planning and Regional Development approached the English Language Programs to discuss the possibility of a summer program to help prepare incoming M.A. students, non-native speakers, to cope better with their coursework.

He supplied information on past students, M.A. course requirements and detailed course descriptions.

MvN: I was hired, on a very part-time basis, and the Chair and I met so I could learn more about the faculty's perceptions of student needs.

A proposal and budget were drawn up and approved, with City Planning providing an advanced Ph. D. candidate, Joyce Pressley, to teach in the program, and to provide input for fieldtrips and on other materials in the program.

JP: I wasn't hired until after much of the planning and development had been done, not a desirable position to be in.

MvN: Late in the planning it appeared that the expected enrollment level was not going to materialize. But it was decided that the program would go on, as an experiment, in anticipation of future programs. To sustain the program, graduate students from Urban Design and Architecture were included.

JP: I had to do some quick, re-thinking to adapt my course and materials recommendations also to Urban Design and Architecture. Thank goodness, I also had a strong background in those areas, as well.

MvN: As you can see the best laid plans....were gradually getting a bit messy. But that's the real world of joint programs.

(Your handout contains brief notes about the program.)

It was assumed that students would already have adequate basic skills in English, but that the program would help students to activate and apply these skills. (A bad assumption!)

I. A Key Admissions Policy

MvN: As this was an experimental program, it was not required, but the faculty members from the various departments and the summer program expected the program to be taken seriously and to be able to see some significant gains.

JP: But...students assumed that since they had been accepted into a Master's program, this intensive summer program was simply an added opportunity. The student's family or sponsor, in most

cases, paid for the summer course. Some took it more seriously than others. But the intensive program was not required, was not a condition of their acceptance into the M.A. program. This situation created tensions in at least three major ways:

MvN: First, the summer program staff members became frustrated with the students.

JP: I expected them to have a certain "work-ethic" and to take some initiative in their studies. Only those few... who had already had work experience... did. I wonder if maybe their own experience in colleges in their home countries led them to believe that once accepted, they could relax. Or maybe because of the high level of technological development in their countries, they did not take our universities seriously. Or perhaps they simply did not know what it was like to be a graduate student anywhere, either in their own countries or elsewhere.

MvN: Second, tensions/frustrations developed between the summer program staff and several faculty members towards the end of the program when faculty members asked for reports, for measures of gains to be used in placing students or reducing course loads.

We had not set exit criteria as this was a new program. We had not agreed to provide reports on individual students. Nor was the program required. I felt that to provide information on these students that might affect their course eligibility, would not be

fair. Furthermore, there were other graduate students who needed the program but had not taken it, but there'd be no feedback to professors on them.

JP: Even though I represented the content departments, I was on the side of the students, for legal reasons. By virtue of having approved in writing a student's admission, and by virtue of a student having accepted the admission, a contract was in effect. As students had not started regular classes, they were not in the position of having done anything that would cause them to become ineligible.

JP: For us and for the participating departments, this cluster of misunderstandings, showed that the departments had to establish a firmer admissions policy in terms of language proficiency and a clear decision had to be made about the expected role of the summer program with regard to conditional admissions. This would reduce, considerably, the potential mismatch of expectations of the faculty, summer staff and students.

MVN: Third, as the program was not required, and the enrollment was lower than expected, it was opened to graduate students from Urban Design and Architecture. This had several effects:

JP: 1. When the students from Urban Design and Architecture learned I was from City Planning, they felt slighted.

Because of my own training and experience, I had been able to make changes in the program to address their interests. But because they already had this sense of being slighted, and because they did not understand the importance of theory courses across all three department, they did not recognize the adjustments I had made for them.

MvN: 2. A second effect was that the other two departments did not have as much of a vested interest in the program as they had not been involved in the planning. While they cooperated with us on organizational support, the students felt slighted.

JP: This was compounded by the fact that most had been recruited primarily through personal contacts between our Penn faculty members and overseas connections. The more experienced students had been recruited more as equals. Once they arrived here they expected to have one-on-one opportunities to get to know their future faculty members.

MvN: ^{Only} A few opportunities could be arranged, partially because faculty members were not available in the summer, and probably partially because the faculty from the other two departments had not been as involved earlier. Even though these arrangements were outside of our program, this colored their feedback on our program.

MvN: A third effect was that the students had varied interests. We tried to turn this into a positive situation from the beginning.

JP: The work of architects, city and regional planners, and urban designers are all inter-related. But too often we don't know how to relate to each other. In graduate school, because of the academic demands, we usually don't have the time to get to know each other even though we are in the same building. Then when we go into the workplace, we don't have a broader perspective. Therefore, working together in this program was to be a unique and valuable opportunity....so we rationalized.

As I introduced various theoretical concepts in class or examined a site on a fieldtrip, I tried to draw on the students' various perspectives and tried to point to the relevance to architecture, city and regional planning and urban design.

But the students were less than convinced. Most passively accepted the situation, but felt frustrations, did not tend to be alert to the perspectives of others. They wanted immediate relevance. One actively fought the situation, demanding only architecture content. But one made the most of the class situation and actively sought out opportunities to make his own contacts outside of the program to satisfy his interests.

II. Lines of Responsibility

JP: Now looking at lines of responsibility...

I was assigned to work on the summer program but remained loosely responsible to my own department.

As the focus in the program was on relevant content in all of courses, I tended to see my position as pivotal. My relationship to the other teachers was not clear to me. In retrospect, perhaps I should have been assigned directly to the English Language Programs, to be responsible to you, Margaret.

MvN: And until we started working on this paper, I had no idea you felt like that. I had thought the arrangement was fine. After all you were being paid by the Department. And this was a joint project. I wanted to keep the concept of joint. You attended our staff meetings regularly and participated in all aspects of the program. I never knew.

III. Perceptions of Teaching Objectives:

MvN: Now on to differences in teaching objectives. Of special interest to language specialists is a dilemma we had with regard to choosing the materials for the Listening course.

MvN: I wanted the students to have some structured listening practice and some relaxed listening so they could acquire some language subconsciously and become accustomed to listening to content in their fields without being tested. I set certain

criteria and asked Joyce to select some short videos and make 1-2 page summaries.

JP: I wanted them to become acquainted with typical lecturing styles (a range of them) and to begin being exposed to key concepts.

MvN: When I discussed the relaxed listening idea with Steve Krashen, he warned me that it wouldn't work. He said, if, for example, you're teaching law students, you would need something highly motivating like "L.A. Law" to keep their attention and have subconscious acquisition work. But I couldn't find the right kind of videos. And by not realizing where Joyce was coming from, thus using the video listening for too many purposes, I defeated my own purpose. The most highly rated videos were ones from The Story of English, on ethnic minorities and English, and not planning or architecture. And, a bit too late, the next to the last week, I found Ann Rand's book, Fountainhead, turned into a movie. The students really enjoyed the storyline and content of content of architecture, politics in urban planning, etc. More like that would have been better. Krashen was right.

IV. Expecting students to see through my eyes

JP: Even though I'm in the same general field as the students, I found I couldn't understand the way they reacted to the physical and social environment. I expected them to be on the same wave

length as I am. All my life I have been very visually aware of my surroundings, of the role of space. Maybe that's one reason I ended up in this field. Even when I lived in India, I was aware of how space was used there. So I was, frankly, annoyed and frustrated with the students' apparent lack of sensitivity to their environment. I felt they were lazy, not making an effort. Remember our reactions to the students when Tim and I came back from the trip to a Hispanic neighborhood...even after he had worked with them to generate questions and things to observe. They didn't seem to see very much or even try to see. This happened on other trips as well.

MvN: I was frustrated, too, but for different reasons. I felt they were just taking for granted the special activities we worked so hard to plan for them, activities regular students in the M.A. program would never have. Like that 3-day trip to Martinsburg, West Virginia, personally guided by a major developer in the area, individual meetings with government planning officials, site visits, a town rich in historic architecture, etc. Besides not appreciating these opportunities, now I think they were still making cultural adjustments. They didn't have the historical background to appreciate the differences in space and design. I guess it can only come with gradual exposure.

JP: Well, maybe, but I still feel they should have made more efforts to try to understand what they were seeing, after all planning, development and design are their areas!

Mvn: We've learned more than a few lessons through this pilot program.

MVN -We've learned the importance of having a clearly defined policy with regard to graduate admissions and language proficiency and the role of a special program.

MvN -We've learned about not having fuzzy lines of responsibility even if trying to promote a joint effort.

JP -We've learned that students may not realize what preparation they need for coping with a new academic situation. Nor may they be ready for being introduced to it. There may be a greater gap than we think, due to differences in training/backgrounds. Also in an ESP program they may not even want all specialty content. They may just want something culturally interesting, fun, and easy to deal with. We have re-learned, once again, that what we think is relevant may not be relevant for the student...Even when one is from the same discipline as the student.

MVN -We've learned that trying to combine two different sets of teaching objectives without fully understanding each

other's goals, may result in a hybrid that is not digestible.

JP -We've learned that even though one may be from the same general field, there are still differences in perceiving the world. These may be related to differences in training, work experience, lack of background knowledge, stage of entry to a new culture, and in personal learning styles.

MVN: Thank you for letting us share with you some of these lessons we've learned. We hope that maybe you might avoid some of the mistakes we made by reducing the mismatch in expectations.